

Maintenance of Ancestral Patterns of Beliefs and Behaviour in Mauritius and Reunion - A Comparative Diasporic Outlook

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Abstract

This anthropological study compares the Ancestral Patterns of Beliefs and behaviour adopted by the Tamils since their migration from their motherlands to alien countries, namely, Mauritius and Reunion. Focus is on the deep-rooted cultural traditions that have been maintained throughout the years despite the impact of foreign cultures. This paper shows how Tamils as they integrated in those societies, the earmark of their traditions are still felt. However, Mauritius and Reunion having two distinct types of government, the former being independent whereas the latter under the French rule, evolved in different directions. This is manifested in their struggle for identity, dress code, their ancestral beliefs, traditions and cultural attributes. In Mauritius the descendants of the Tamils being at par with their religion and culture and due to various facilities deployed by the government for the promotion of Tamil culture, strive for their cultural survival, hence resisting the new challenges facing them. Whereas in Reunion, due to the French government's effort to assimilate these Tamils under their rule, the descendents of the Tamils could no longer resist the changes. Their behaviour is dually shaped as they adapt themselves to both Tamil culture and Christianity alongside. Hence, very few elements of culture are maintained in Reunion island as compared to Mauritius where more exposure to language, culture can be felt.

Keywords: Mauritius, Reunion, Tamils, identity, cultural assimilation, cultural tolerance, beliefs, Arts

Introduction

This paper proposes that the research area of Diaspora Studies can benefit at several levels from the concept of acculturation and adaptation to the host countries. It is argued that the migration of one group of people into another community can have both an impact on the migrating people's behaviour as well as their way of living and beliefs. The shift from one community to another very often made the adaptability to the host cultures easier. Underlying that transition lies the resistance of the migrating communities in maintaining their ancestral patterns of beliefs and behaviour. Mauritius and Reunion, known as sister islands have developed differently because they have been governed by two colonizing powers having had different approach to colonization. Mauritius being independent whereas Reunion still operating as French Department has impacted on the life of the Tamils in different ways. Thus, this paper provides a brief comparison of Tamil people as they set foot on foreign lands namely Mauritius and Reunion and their struggle to maintain certain patterns of beliefs, behaviour and identity amidst alien cultures during the last two centuries.

Mauritius and Reunion

Situated in the southern hemisphere about 200 kilometres southwest of Mauritius, Reunion is one of the Overseas Department of France. It has a population of about 850,000 among whom around 120,000 are Tamils.

Found 550 miles to the west coast of Madagascar, Mauritius, out of a population of 1.2 million, constitutes of 115,000 Tamils. It was under the governorship of Labourdonnais that Tamil artisans and masons were brought to Mauritius from Pondicherry. Massive migration took place due to the excess pooling of labour from South India to work in sugarcane plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The socio-economic factors, harsh living conditions of the Tamils, and the 'pull' and 'push' are important elements that allowed the Tamils to be brought in mass in these two countries of the Indian Ocean.

During the French occupation Tamils played an important part in economic life of the country. According to Sungeelee, French newspapers published in Tamil, accounts of important events and advertisements.

Arrivals of the Tamils

Migration of people across the world is an inseparable part of human history. The people of Tamil origin have settled in 70 countries including Mauritius and Reunion. Indeed, these two islands, both found in the Indian Ocean, witnessed mass migration during the French rule. Although Indian's presence was felt since the Dutch period, Tamils are known to have been brought to Mauritius under the French to serve as artisans and traders and they landed at Grand Port. Indeed, Tamils migrated to Mauritius under the indentured labour system on 1st August 1829. Whereas Tamil labour migration started from 1829 in Reunion and from 1851 to 1883, an overall of 148,911 Tamils, commonly known as 'Malabars' were known to have migrated from Pondicherry, Karaikal and Madras. The first ones were transported in the ship named 'La Turquoise.' The Tamils as they set foot on the island were brought to the place named 'Lazarets de la Grande Chaloupe', from where they scattered to different parts of the island. This explains why Tamil became widespread and it has laid its imprint in both islands. Tamil, though it was amalgamated with other cultures, it had its right place in the Mauritian society and it was the first Indian language to be included in the legislative Assembly.

According to Christian Ghasarian, Mauritius after accession to independence in 1968, most of the traditional customs and habits of the Tamils that have been under the British rule have been preserved. Today the Tamil population manifests its identity through many signs of identity not so explicit in Reunion Island, and this is exhibited in their dress codes, eating habits and so on.

Whereas in Reunion, since the beginning of immigration, French colonizers tried to bring the populations under its control and imposed rules upon them, hence converting many of them to Christianity. Today descendants of Tamil immigrants though heavily involved in the French culture, have retained many ancestral patterns of belief and behaviour through their personal efforts.

Maintenance of Identity

Today descendants of Tamils living in both Mauritius and Reunion have adopted different ways of behaviour. In Mauritius there is a wide wave of consciousness of the Tamils about their religion, Tamil language and culture. This is reflected not only in their daily lives but during gatherings on occasions such as weddings, funerals, meetings of socio-cultural organizations, and

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celebrations. In all these, there is current usage of Tamil language and cultural practices are given due consideration. There is a great urge among Tamil people to learn the language even though there is significant impact of other cultures on Tamil language. The different activities conducted by young Tamil population, their involvement in cultural programmes are enough to reveal their identity which they do not want to lose under any circumstances.

Although nowadays there are some cases of intermarriages, yet a large majority of Tamils stick to their ancestral religion and marry within their community, hence preserving their identity.

Situation in Reunion

In Reunion, the French influence had such an overwhelming impact on Tamils that their behavioural patterns and social norms have been influenced by the French. Nevertheless, within the Tamil Malabars, traditional ways and practices are kept alive and passed from one generation to another. Even though they intermarry, they continue to maintain certain aspects of their original culture.

The Tamil immigrants, culturally uprooted, had to adapt themselves to a new social and cultural environment. So, they developed a new way of life in response to different needs and obligations. The great imbalance among Tamil immigrants did not allow them to preserve and transmit their identity. Due to mass intermarriages, Tamils in Reunion have Tamil names without any corresponding adoption of Indian practices. Only ancestors who have intermarried among themselves had been able to maintain their original culture in their private life and transmitted it to their descendants.

In Reunion, although leaders of socio-cultural organisations organise religious festivals annually, not much is done to safeguard the identity of those Tamils living in Reunion. This is due to the fact that their ancestors after migration to Reunion adopted Christianity for various reasons and had their children christened. That's why even today the descendants bear Christian names. Because of Christian influence their adoption of ancestral Tamil religious culture is minimal.

In Reunion, Tamil language which was once the Mother tongue of their ancestors is now only a foreign language. Tamil spoken language is present only in families of performing priests and Tamil migrants from Tamil Nadu. Even words which have been preserved till now have known changes in their way of pronunciation, so that 'kali' became 'karli', 'kovil' became 'coil' or 'coilou', and 'chapel' for temples in rural areas. 'karagam' has become 'karlon'. 'Marliémen' instead of 'Mariammen' (C. Ghasarian). In Mauritius, names of deities, places of worship and Tamil words have been kept with their original way of pronunciation.

Tamil Diaspora in Mauritius

Once set foot in Mauritius, the Tamils while adapting to their new environment were given the liberty to dress as in their country of origin. This cultural aspect has been maintained throughout the years and today the dress codes of Tamils have not known many changes. Tamil women still wear saris during prayer ceremonies, weddings, funerals, while young Tamil girls usually wear skirts while attending temples. Only a minority of men wear *vesti* during religious festivals like cavadee, Theemeedee and Govinden. A significant number of boys wear the kurta and jeans. So, the way of dressing of Tamils, wearing of flowers in the hair, *pottu* on the forehead are elements that reveal the cultural identity of the Tamils.

Cultural Assimilation in Reunion

In Reunion the French policy of cultural assimilation forced the Tamils to adopt a new mode of dressing. Since very early period Tamil women stopped wearing their traditional dress and men had to wear trousers. Today it has become difficult to see a typical old Tamil woman, since apart from the saree, the Indian nose ring, anklets, and the toe ring disappeared long time back. Nowadays one no longer recognises Tamils by their appearance as this is blended with European culture.

Preservation of Some Elements of Culture

However, there are several elements of culture that have been preserved till now in Reunion, one of it being the removal of shoes before entering a house, the frequent cleaning of feet and hands with water, especially before entering a temple.

The eating habits in Mauritius and Reunion differ a lot. In Mauritius although there is the impact of other cultures on Tamil language, yet most Tamil traditional dishes such as the arusuvai, pullikuzhambu, pullichoru, rougail are still retained and this shows that Tamils are keeping to that tradition. A few Tamil families including that of the priests usually cook traditional dishes like idli, dosai, tayirsaadam, uppuma and so on. Tamils' speciality in the use of spices and the way of cooking traditional foods dissociate them from people of other religions. Even now for Theebavallee Tamils prepare cakes like the adirasom, murukku, torpam, kettitorpam and share with other communities.

The Tamil language has left its mark in the culinary vocabulary in Reunion, especially with the use of the word rougail (Urugai in Tamil). Even the goat curry with masala can be considered Indo-Reunion dish, for the goat is sacrificed by some Tamils on various religious ceremonies and is cooked and eaten at the temples' premises. This goat massala is now part of the traditional dishes of the island.

Today only in Tamil migrants' families Tamil traditional dishes like idli, dorsai, and uppuma are found. The kozhoukattai is used while conducting prayers to small deities and this is commonly known as 'bonbon kolkotté'. For Theebavallee the absence of traditional cakes is noted. The only symbol of identity regarding cakes is the vadai which they called 'bonbon piment' and even the main ingredient, that is the big peas, are used as compared to dhol used in Mauritius.

Tamil language

In Mauritius, during the indentured period no restrictions were laid on the teaching of Tamil. Tamil language used to be taught by 'vaatiyar' in what was known as 'Tinnaipalli'. In 1847 a Tamil syllabus intended for Tamil students was devised for examination purposes and it laid emphasis on Tamil grammar and Nannool. In Mauritius the All Mauritius Tamil Temples Federation, the Tamil Cultural Centre, Tamil Speaking Union have been created with the main aim of enhancing Tamil language as well as developing Tamil culture. Even the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, a para-state body, has been founded with the main aim of promoting Indian languages, including Tamil.

Although there has been great move for learning Tamil, yet the actual Tamil speakers among the ethnic Tamils consist of only 20%. Today Tamil is taught at primary, secondary and Tertiary level. To help propagating Tamil language the Media is doing a tremendous job. The time allocated for Tamil programmes and films have been increased so that Mauritians Tamils benefit from it.

After much effort one more Tamil channel, namely, Podigai has been brought to the doorstep of each Tamil family.

In Reunion Island, two TV programmes with a duration of half hour each are broadcast on Sundays. The first one 'Padel' consists of devotional songs, agenda for the temple or priest explaining about Hinduism, great sages and so on. These are broadcast only in French. The second one is about Theemeedee, BalTamoul or Cavadee.

Professor A. Murugaiyan, Member of the Practical School of Advanced Studies, Paris, believes that most people belonging to the Indian Diaspora are from Tamil speaking areas. They use Tamil for prayers, perform the same rituals that they have been practising for centuries, celebrate the cavadee, firewalking and all the rituals attributed to goddess Mariammen. He further stresses in an International Symposium on contact between South India and France, in Pondicherry that immigrants who left for French speaking departments as indentured labourers had their own language and cultural identity. Now they are French nationals with an Indian cultural background.

Tamils in Reunion had been cut off from their country of origin. Schools operated in Reunion laid more emphasis on teaching of French, Spanish, English. Although there have been many attempts to open Tamil schools, these have not been successful. The need for learning Tamil was not felt until 1985 when there was the creation of a Tamil school at St. Paul through the initiative of Atchagar Gopalsamy, a Mauritian priest. With the creation of that school, there was impressive development in the teaching of Hinduism. But a number of books had already disappeared by that time. Hence teaching was carried out orally. Even rituals learned from grandparents were transmitted orally and committed to memory.

The Institute of Languages and Anthropology was created at the university not only to promote the language but to conduct courses in Tamil on priest duties, Tamil calendar and Tamil spoken language. In 2013 a memorandum has been signed between Reunion and Mahatma Gandhi Institute to facilitate the teaching of Tamil and Hindi in Reunion, but no positive result was obtained.

Cultural Tolerance and Beliefs

Diaspora Tamils are known to have strong belief in their religion. Tamil migrant while migrating abroad brought with them their culture, beliefs, habits and customs. In Mauritius Tamils were given the freedom to practice their religion, venerate their gods at any time.

Unlike Mauritius, Reunion has not been a landmark in the Indian Ocean. Tamils in Reunion claim to have a strong bond with India. Although 90% of the Indians are Hindus of Tamil origin, their inability to read and write Tamil language made them alien to their mother tongue. Paul Canaguy, President of the Global Organisation, pointed out that 'Our nationality is French. But spiritually and culturally we are Indians'.

J.F. Dupon affirms that 'although the immigrants adopt the Christian rituals, this did not put at stake the Tamil religion. He further emphasises that rituals linked to birth, death and wedding are in line with Christian rituals. Religion has known many changes and is not based on any precise dogma. Tamil devotees and priests explain their faith and meaning of rituals with much difficulty.

Temples in Mauritius and Reunion

The Tamil migrants from South India, mostly craftsmen and traders, were pioneers of the places of worship. In Mauritius more than 125 Tamil Temples have been erected with the aim of spreading religious faith among Tamil population. Tamil Indentured Labourers who were brought in later were known to have a strong belief in their ancestral values and religion. This belief has prevailed till now. Religious festivals like cavadee, Theemeedee, kanji, Govinden among others are celebrated region-wise yearly by their descendants. It is to be noted that the Thaipusam Cavadee festival is celebrated with much fervour and it involves massive participation of Tamils. This Thaipusam day has been decreed public holiday more than half century ago.

In Mauritius Tamils have a strong belief that Mother Goddess protects the village and can offer blessings or cause destruction. They feel that a festival like Theemeedee is a place where her presence is felt, offerings can be made to appease her, and prayers can be answered. So, when women became possessed with the spirit of the goddess during this festival, this initiates non-Tamils to participate in it.

The practices and traditions of each celebration vary considerably based on location, caste, goddess being worshipped. For example, on the Medine Sugar Estate in Bambous during the Kali Theemeedee eight goats are sacrificed yearly.

In Mauritius, most of the cultural elements have been preserved whereas in Reunion the Tamils are quite chaotic about the Tamil language. But as far as religion is concerned Tamils' massive participation in Cavadee celebration especially in the area of St André indicates that Tamil culture has not been totally wiped out there. Although there is no eagerness to learn the Tamil language, yet that aspect of spirituality is maintained.

Amazing Preservation in Reunion

According to Christian Ghasarian, Tamils have developed some patterns of behaviour that are not quite those of their ancestors from Tamil Nadu nor those of the other inhabitants of Reunion Island. Despite a strong policy of acculturation and assimilation led by French on the migrants, Tamils have managed to maintain, in an adapted manner, most of their ancestral conceptions and practices.

In Reunion, Tamils' adherence to the practices of their religion and culture kept them strong and united. Rituals and ceremonies like Theemeedee still persist and the fervour with which these are celebrated is to be noted. In contrast to Mauritius, in Reunion the devotees observe a fast of 18 days and instead of sambar, their traditional 'poicytrus' is cooked. In Reunion Island Theemeedee and Kali festivals usually involve the sacrifice of animals.

In South India, cults devoted for Dravidian gods, incarnations of Kali or Durga, sacrifice of animals were observed by 80% of the population. This tradition was brought and practised in Reunion. Rituals which were considered dead were revived with the arrival of several priests from Mauritius and Brahmins from South India. Tamils in Reunion venerate goddesses like Kali, Pandialé and Mariammen.

It is believed that gods from South India are very often from the feminine sex and they all report to the Mother Goddess of the Dravidian. Hence two types of offering, one purely vegetarian and the other carnivorous are presented to these gods. So, even today Tamils continue with the

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practice of sacrificing animals like goats, cocks and hens during ceremonies in honour of the goddesses. Tamils' extreme faith in goddess Kali is to be noted as she is considered to be most powerful and can eliminate human problems.

Apart from the main gods, deities like Mardevirin (MaduraiVira Swami), Minisprin (Mouniswaran), Pandyalé (Dolvédé, Draupadi) are venerated. Some families conduct those prayers outside their houses among their family members and relatives whereas others in their family 'chapel'. These prayers comprise sacrifices of animals, which are considered a must.

In Mauritius, Petchaye is also venerated as one of the deities. These prayers are conducted with some sort of secrecy among only family members. Nowadays a large majority of Tamils do not perform animal sacrifice but offer only vegetarian food. Quite a significant number of Tamils have stopped the practice of animal sacrifice.

Tamil Arts

With the arrival of Tamil artisans to Mauritius several arts were brought along. Among these arts Tamil drama which was in the ancient form of the 'kuttu' was enacted along with musical instruments like pambai, udukkai, and tappu. Pioneers like Mouttukumaren Sungeelee, Perumall Soobrayen and Rajarethnum Sungeelee have contributed to this field by acting as playwrights. Perumall Soobrayen's 'Sudaram', Mouttukumaren's 'Barister Kamalanaden', Rajarethnum's 'InbamanaThandanei' and 'Paditta serukku' have indeed laid down the path to more local playwrights. As from 1975 The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture started The National Drama Festival in Tamil with the aim of promoting this art.

In Reunion as well, Drama has been playing a very important role in the lives of the Tamils. Today the 'BalTamoul' or 'Narlegon', or 'Barldon' which has been derived from the 'Kuttu' is conducted during ceremonies like 'Karmon', Pongal, Puttandu and Theemeedee. During the eighteen days of fast in Temples, night representations of BalTamoul are conducted. During Theemeedee and on other occasions texts like the Mahabaradam and Bharadam are enacted. It's the vattiyar or the priests who chants the verses.

Jean Régis Ramsamy in his article 'Témoignages' states that 'Credit goes to the Nagapin family, to associations like 'Les Amis de L'inde' for the preservation of these 'Nadrons' in Reunion. The role of the chief dancer Mrs Raghunath from Pondicherry cannot be underestimated.'

Tamil Weddings

Wedding is a very important component of culture. When comparing Mauritius and Reunion, one can see changes in certain elements due to the impact of other cultures on Tamil weddings. In Mauritius there are a few cases where younger generation individuals marry partners of different ethnic and religious groups. Hence, they adopt either the spouse's culture and have the wedding celebrated in church or can perform it conforming to the norms of both Tamil and Christian.

In Reunion, the situation is such that a large number of Tamils as they have adopted Christianity, conduct weddings in church. A handful of Tamils celebrate it in the same way as it is celebrated in Mauritius. The married couples usually wear the traditional clothes, saree for the bride and vesti for the bridegroom. Ceremonies of tying the thali, married women carrying plates with things for the ritual, wearing the minji and metti, ritual with Arasanikal, tying the kanganam, ritual washing of parents' feet know only slight differences. For instance, in Mauritius they usually wash

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the feet with water and sprinkle flowers on them, whereas in Reunion milk, honey, curd, turmeric, sandal paste and flower petals are used for this ritual.

Links with Country of Origin

The Tamil migrants upon their arrival to Mauritius had could not maintain all links to their country of origin. Today with globalisation and with the view of bridging the gap between cultures, a great attempt is made by the government of Mauritius and socio-cultural organisations in that direction. Hence artists from Tamil Nadu are invited to perform during celebrations. Government of Tamil Nadu is yearly providing scholarships for Tamil students to go and pursue Tamil studies there.

Lynda Savaranin, student of the University of Reunion, pointed out in one of her interviews that today due to the opening of frontiers with India the descendants of the immigrants are getting closer to the Indian cult through books, culture and the priests. Opening of frontiers. new air links, political and pedagogical exchanges are the factors that have changed Hinduism today.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is befitting to say that both in Mauritius and Reunion elements of Tamil culture and heritage can be seen. In Mauritius, Tamils have been maintaining their beliefs and modes of behaviour, whereas in Reunion the impact of French culture on Tamil culture is obvious. Although some elements of culture are still prevalent, yet an anthropological study will be required to determine to what extent these islands have been able to maintain Tamil culture.

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